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3

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Links Reported Among Latin Death Squads

Behind the violence in Latin America are not only left-wing guerrillas but right-wing assassins who belong to death squads. They have cast a dark specter over the peace process.

I have learned there's an international league of death squads operating from Mexico to Argentina. Ordinarily, they maintain the strictest secrecy about their operations. But, through a contact in the Honduran secret police, my associate Jon Lee Anderson arranged a face-to-face interview in Honduras with an outspoken leader and founder of the Honduran death squad.

He is a thin, fair-haired man in his 30s, whom I will call El Lobo (The Wolf). By day he is a doctor at the National Hospital in Tegucigalpa. By night he is an assassin for ELA, the Spanish initials for Anti-Communist Combat Army.

The ELA is a relatively new death squad, founded in 1979. Unlike its counterparts in Guatemala, El Salvador and Argentina, the ELA is not made up primarily of paramilitary security forces, according to El Lobo.

Perhaps it was his amateur status that made El Lobo indiscreet enough to brag to a Yankee reporter: "We are affiliated and in contact with similar groups in other countries."

The ELA had close ties, he said, with the Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez Brigade in El Salvador. This is the group that recently slaughtered nine members of a peasant cooperative, including two pregnant women, as part of a stepped-up campaign of terror.

Human rights groups estimate that 40,000 people have died in El Salvador since 1980. About half of those were civilians who were suspected of leftist leanings and were murdered by the death squads.

El Lobo expressed admiration for the Salvadoran death squad and the general whose name it took. Gen. Hernandez was a Salvadoran dictator who ordered the massacre of an estimated 30,000 Indians and peasants after a communist-backed uprising in the 1930s.

"He handled communists the right way," said El Lobo. "He killed every one he caught."

El Lobo gave this account of the international fraternity of death squads: "We go to annual conferences. I went to last year's. It was in Buenos Aires. The Triple A put it on."

He was not referring to an automobile association, but to the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance. This is a clandestine confederation of police, military and paramilitary goons responsible for thousands of murders and other disappearances during the "dirty war" of the 1970s.

The overall umbrella group for the death squad network is CAL (Latin American Anti-Communist Confederation), based in Mexico. "CAL is our political front," said El Lobo. "We are all 'La Mano Blanco.' "

La Mano Blanco (The White Hand) is the name for the warning white glove or hand print left on or near a victim's body. According to a former CIA "dirty tricks" specialist, La Mano Blanco was set up by the CIA in Guatemala in the 1950s after the agency engineered the ouster of leftist president Jacobo Arbenz.

Although now a member of La Mano Blanco's network, the Honduran death squad organization was set up independently, El Lobo said.

Footnote: The resurgence last autumn of right-wing squads in El Salvador led Congress to order a stop to U.S. backing for the Salvadoran security forces that control the assassins. But President Reagan vetoed the measure, and suspected leftists are still being murdered with impunity by goons whose salaries are indirectly paid by U.S. taxpayers. The White House, however, is pressuring the Salvadoran government to purge police and military officials who are known death squad members.

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